

The Art Of Creative Nonfiction

A great uncle of mine, whose name was never mentioned, lived as a hobo. He would appear now and again during the Depression years, walking up Logan Street in Steubenville from the river and the railroad tracks. He may have smelled like catfish, or, perhaps, coal smoke. There is no consensus in the family on his smell. But when he did show up, he would often leave a bag of groceries on the back porch. Where he got the money has been a matter of conjecture all these years. Maybe he robbed people. Maybe he worked as a mandolin busker in downtown Wheeling. (A mandolin still survives in the family, though many claim it was my grandfather's.) Maybe, maybe not. And the bag of groceries always contained a number of items. Oranges. Cans of sardines. Once a five-pound lump of bologna: there was consensus on the bologna. There certainly was, at least once, a great lump of bologna. My grandmother closed her eyes when slicing thick slabs of it for my grandfather's lunch. "Why did you close your eyes when you cut?" I asked her once. "It made the bologna go further," she said. On this there was no consensus. My Uncle Paul reported, "There was never enough bologna." My Uncle Jack maintained, "It was bologna, bologna, bologna. Once I got so fed up with bologna that I went down to the river and seined a mess of crawfish from the sunken end of a barge and brought them home in a minnow bucket. I boiled them up on the stove, and your grandmother looked at me like I was a unicorn." On this, too, there is no consensus. It's all maybe/maybe not. My hobo uncle smelled like rosewater. Maybe like turpentine. Maybe/maybe not. In this way a family creates its story.

(302 words)